

Everybody Knows My Dirty Little Secret by JarOfJelli

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: "Richie Tozier sucks flamer COCK", (when he's around Eddie), And Richie's just trying to be closeted IN PEACE, Angst, Bev isn't around a lot cuz she moved I'm SORRY, Bullying, Canon-Compliant for the first movie, Fluff, Gay Richie Tozier, Homophobia, Homophobic Language, I hated that shit, I sort of combined the book canon with movie canon, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Oblivious Eddie Kaspbrak, Period-Typical Homophobia, Pining, Post-Chapter 1, Richie Tozier Loves Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier and Stan Uris are best friends change my mind, Richie Tozier is Bad at Feelings, So i had this idea that like the whole school knew about what happened at the arcade, Soft Richie Tozier, Stan Uris is also tired of Richie's disaster gay self, Stanley Uris is a Good Friend, The Losers Club, The movie erased their friendship I'm salty, This entire fic was based off of one (1) tumblr post, i wrote this instead of doing homework, it was about the grafitti in Bev's stall, it's okay tho we love him, no memory loss, not really the second?? I guess

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Maggie Tozier, Mike Hanlon, Random background people I added, Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier's Parents, Stanley Uris, Wentworth Tozier

Relationships: Ben Hanscom & Richie Tozier, Bill Denbrough & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak & Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Mike Hanlon & Richie Tozier, Richie Tozier & Stanley Uris

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Summary:

Richie noticed it around the beginning of the school year. He noticed, and it bothered him greatly, as hard as he tried not to let it. He always tried to let things bounce off of him, but it was a little bit harder around this time.

(In which we acknowledge that The Arcade Scene happened in a public place around people who probably went to Richie's school, and that kids will believe anything they hear if it's written in a bathroom stall.)

1. i feel the way that you stare at the back of my neck

Richie noticed it around the beginning of the school year. It was the eighth grade, just one last year before he could move on to high school and leave this hellish place behind. Of course, all his peers and his problems would follow him there, but thinking about moving on and starting high school made him feel mature and freer for some reason. The first day was relatively normal, the same hustle and bustle every school year brings (except for his expanded friend group and a few extra books). It was the following week, as everybody was starting to settle into their new schedules and classrooms that he really began to take note. He noticed, and it bothered him greatly, as hard as he tried not to let it. He always tried to let things bounce off of him, but it was a little bit harder around this time.

It started with the stares. Sure, he was used to it. Having a mouth with zero filter meant he got looked at a lot whenever he did or said something really funny or really stupid (which to Richie were synonymous). But these stares were different. It wasn't just Bowers' gang staring in a predatory way as he walked down the hall or the big kids trying to squish him like a bug with their eyes (Bowers' gang had all gone missing this summer, news said they were killed by Henry. Richie knew deep down that wasn't quite right, but he couldn't say much on the matter or most would think he was crazy. As for the big kids, well he *was* a big kid now). He felt like every time somebody saw him they stared, their eyes sweeping him up and down in a way that made him feel judged and confused. Then, he could have sworn in the middle of class the kids behind him would whisper his name in their conversation but as soon as Richie turned to them they were absorbed into their work or themselves.

His brain ran a mile a minute with possibilities of what is going on, what they're saying, why they stare for so long. He sort of knew in his mind why, or he was pretty sure he knew at least. Henry, before the whole situation at Neibolt (which he was trying to block out from his brain as much as possible), must have blabbed at what happened at the arcade with his cousin. He could see it now, that wicked, bone-chilling smile spreading from one face to another as he mumbled in their ear "Richie Tozier is a fucking cocksucker". It sent shivers up his

entire body and put a lump in his throat that wouldn't go away. He could just be going crazy, but God, what if they did know? What if they kept talking and talking until his friends heard? What if somebody walked up to Ben, or Stan, or (God in heaven forbid) Eddie, and told them all about how he was a great big fucking homo? How would they react? Sure, times were changing. He saw on the news; protests in big cities about gays being proud. But this was Derry, not San Fran or New York. Derry people weren't as tolerant of gays being open, and he didn't know if his friends were an exception.

You're being ridiculous, he told himself, *they wouldn't believe it anyway. "Richie?"* he could hear Bill saying *"N-no, no w-way. You know h-huh-how o-often I have to h-heh-hear him ruh-ruh-ramble on and on about g-guh-girls?"*. Yeah, he was kidding himself. They were probably all talking about the Losers collectively. How Bev had suddenly moved away, Eddie's mysterious broken arm, how Ben had suddenly made friends after being alone for years. It was crazy of him to think anybody would know. Henry was locked up, the rest of his gang was presumably (definitely) dead. There was no way anybody would believe Henry anyway, with him being incarcerated now.

Richie was seated in his science class, his last class of the day, ready to do nothing besides stare out the window and not pay attention at all. It was about a month into the school year now, meaning any excitement he had gotten in learning due to starting a new grade had swiftly faded. The class window had a nice view of the soccer field, where he saw the boy's soccer team stretching next to the bleachers for what he presumed to be an early practice. His eyes wandered over each of the players as they laughed and joked and did deep lunges to loosen their quad muscles or whatever. He noticed one boy in particular, whom he recognized as Donovan Powell, a boy who was in his class last year. He always ate the same ham and cheese sandwich every day for lunch and he had the world's greenest eyes. Donovan was smiling with his team as he stretched his arms above his head, his shirt lifted slightly and showing a small sliver of his stomach. Richie averted his gaze as if the sight had burned him and sighed to himself. He hated to be some self-pitying jackass but God did he hate these feelings. Just a few months ago, Richie was in such vehement denial he would have told himself that all boys looked at other boys that way. All boys were curious about how it felt to hold

another boy's hand, to curl into them and run your hands through their soft, neat hair, to have *him* leaning into you smiling that cute little smile he does and-

He shook his head after that last thought, as if to snap himself out of it. His face had turned hot as soon as his thoughts had turned to a specific boy. It had taken him months, but Richie was finally able to admit to himself that he was hopelessly and dreadfully into one of his best friends; Eddie Kaspbrack. He had even carved their initials in the kissing bridge to solidify it; a confession to nobody but himself and the old wood he had carved it in. Of course, he'd never let anybody else know. It was one thing to be queer, but to be queer and have a crush on your unattainable best friend? That was quite the knee-slapper if you asked Richie. A joke he'd never ever tell anybody, for once. God, if Eddie ever found out, he might not live to see the next day. Richie couldn't handle not hearing Eddie ranting to or at him every single day, and he's sure as hell that Eddie would be keeping his distance if he knew just how much Richie loved his rantings, how his cheeks tinted red at his teasing, how much he waved his arms around frantically as he spoke as if words weren't enough. Eddie was as vital to Richie's well being as fresh air and sunlight was, as cheesy as the idea was.

Richie was thrown out of his thoughts by a tap on the back of his head, as if something had been thrown at it. He whipped his head around just in time to see two boys, Cody (he wasn't sure of his last name) and Mikey Terrace (whom he knew as the kid who once had to go to the hospital in fifth grade for shoving five BBs up his nose) chuckling to themselves and looking at the floor beneath him. He followed their gaze to a small crumpled piece of paper next to his chair, the thing that must have hit his head. He crouched off of his chair quickly to pick it up as the teacher, Mrs. Peters, rushed into class and apologized for being slightly tardy. He sat back into his chair, stole another glance at Cody and Mikey, who were side-eyeing him like crazy, and opened the paper.

'How's the view from the window, fairy?' the words stared at him in black pen.

Richie's blood turned to ice. He stopped breathing and clenched the

crinkled paper tightly. Fuck, okay so maybe it wasn't all in his head. Maybe everybody did think he was a queer. Everybody *knew* that he was a queer. All of the reassurances he had told himself since this whole fiasco had started were thrown out of that classroom window onto the soccer field with those stupid boys and their stupid stretches and his stupid, *stupid* mind which had wandered too far. He didn't look back at those assholes again, just shoved the note into his bag and tried not to think about it.

News Flash: he thought about it the entire class, not focusing on writing down the definition of viscosity and instead imagining a million scenarios where he was outed by the entire school as being a flaming homo. Richie hesitantly, as if Cody and Mikey would hear his thoughts and throw more words that made him hurt, let himself imagine just *one* scenario where Eddie was too, and that ended up making him feel even more like shit. After all, of every outcome, that one was by far the least likely.

2. i can't study thinking about you

Smoke hazed over Richie's vision as he exhaled. All of the colours in his room were covered by that thick grey for just a moment, and it was almost peaceful.

Richie was lying on his bed, comic in one hand, cigarette in the other. He had a half-pack of Marlboros stuffed under his mattress he bought last weekend from some high-schooler with a ratty moustache that had been sitting outside the Aladdin. The guy was smoking one when Richie exited with a pocket full of cash he had gotten from his dad for helping his mom cleaning the bathroom that afternoon. He had a fiver in his hand, ready to spend it all on candy at the convenience store, when he spotted the guy smoking.

"Hey, mind if I bum one off ya?" he had asked, ready to be denied but asking anyway. He thought he'd treat himself. The guy gave him a suspicious once-over, half-burned cigarette hanging out of his mouth, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out the whole pack.

"You can have the whole thing if you give me that money in your hand" he muttered, shaking the little box.

"A whole fiver for a pack?! That's a rip off!" Richie protested, not willing to give up his hard-earned money.

"Then go into a store and buy some yourself, kiddo" the guy shot back. Richie sighed, realizing that he really had no other choice if he wanted those cigs. He handed the bill over, and received a mostly full box of Marlboros in return.

And now he sat there, alone and nobody to smoke them with. Bev used to be his go-to, but she was living with her aunt way outside of Derry now. None of the other Losers smoked, except maybe Bill, but he only really smoked with large groups of people. A social-smoker. Stan was his best friend and spent a lot of time with him, but he absolutely hated the smell of cigarettes, so Richie tried not to do it around him. Same with Ben, Mike, and Eddie. Eddie was a bit more temperamental about his aversion to cigarettes than the others,

though. Eddie would cough and whine and lecture until Richie put it out, which didn't bother him too much. He knew he should quit anyway, and hearing it from Eddie also made throwing the habit all the more compelling. Thinking of Eddie only made him think about the note he had politely been socked in the head with. He was very actively trying not to think about it, just like he had been in class. Richie gave one last long drag of his cigarette as it reached the filter, watching the paper smoulder and burn between his fingers. Despite the regularity of his smoking habit, the extra-large drag stung his throat and made him let out a loud cough. He froze up, looking towards the door. His mom was right down stairs, preparing dinner. He prayed she didn't hear him and come up to check on him. When he heard only the faintest clatter of pans from the kitchen and nothing else, he assumed he was fine.

That was when there was a muffled but sharp banging noise. Somebody was knocking on the front door downstairs. Richie let out a long, frustrated sigh. If company was over, that meant he would have to get rid of the smoke and the smell. In preparation, he leaned out of the open window above his bed and tossed the finished cigarette out. He grabbed the air-freshener from his nightstand and sprayed it around the room, attempting to mask the stench of tobacco. He took off his glasses to wipe off the film of smoke that had gathered on the lens. He ought to start taking his glasses off when he smokes. He heard his mother, open the door, exclaim something cheerily, and then call "Richie! Eddie's at the door!".

Now that was weird. Typically Eddie called before he came over, he liked to plan his visits out. As much of a (perfect) brat Eddie could be, he hated feeling like a burden, and Richie knew that showing up uninvited made him feel that way. Richie left his room, smelling the ham his mother was making as well as something else. Potatoes? Eh, he'd figure it out when supper rolled around. He practically jumped down the stairs and slid down the front hall. His mother was waiting in front of the door, talking to Eddie. She turned to him, "Now Richie, you need to stop stomping around like that, you could break something". It went through one ear and right out the other.

"Right, okay Mom" he said, almost pushing her out of the way to get into the doorway. She tsk'd and walked back to the kitchen, leaving

the two boys alone to talk. Richie looked Eddie in the eyes with a curious raise of his brow and a grin on his face. "Now wot do we 'ave 'ere? A liddle Eddie Spaghetti we do! What brings you to my 'umble abode, chap?" Richie exclaimed, doing his British Voice out of habit.

Eddie rolls his eyes before settling them on Richie, and he noticed that he didn't have the same humour in his eyes when Richie typically did one of his Voices. "Can I stay here for a bit?" he asked, voice hoarse and shoulders slumped. That had him worried. What had happened?

Richie's face fell but he tried to stay humourous for Eddie. "Uh, sure, dude. What, your mom sneak one of your old bullshit pills into your food?" he asked, not expecting Eddie to turn his head away and cross his arms defensively in front of his chest.

"What do you care, Trashmouth?" he muttered, and Richie realized he hit a nerve.

He put his arm around Eddie's shoulders and led him into the house, closing the door behind them. "Listen Eds-

"Don't call me that".

"Right, anyway Spaghetti Man, I was saying we'd be happy to have you over" Richie said, pulling Eddie up the stairs. He yelled behind them, "Ma, Eddie's staying over for a bit! We're gonna go hang in my room!"

His mom called back, "Alright boys! I'll set an extra plate for you, Eddie! Dinner will be done in ten minutes!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Tozier!" Eddie called back as well, being as polite as he could have after showing up at Richie's house uninvited. Richie moved them both into his room sat them down on his bed, stepping over piles of clothes to do it. Man, his mom would kill him once she saw his room. Eddie scrunched his nose (*adorable* Richie thought to himself) "Were you smoking just now? I can smell it".

"Well I didn't expect my Eds to drop by so unexpectedly" he

explained, then smiled awkwardly, "I tried to cover it with air-freshener".

Eddie made a dissatisfied noise in the back of his throat "I guess beggars can't be choosers".

"You didn't answer my question by the way" Richie said.

"Hm?"

"Why are you here?"

Eddie picked at his cast, lightly brushing over the large letters written upon it. He remembered teasing Eddie when he saw that he had written over the 'S' in 'LOSER' with a 'V'. *"You didn't have to do that, Eds. I already know you're my favourite lover. Next to your mom, of course!"* he had smirked. Eddie had huffed and shoved his side with his good arm, calling him a dick. Eddie now looked him in the eyes, before looking back down at his cast.

"My mom and I have been fighting a lot" he murmured, hands now resting still on his lap, "She's still torn up about the pills thing. I just needed to get out of the house for a few hours".

Everything made much more sense now. Eddie had been quiet since the school year started, but he just assumed it was because all they went through with it. He feels like an idiot for not even considering that he was still fighting with his mother. Conceited, overbearing bitch. Richie realized his arm was still wrapped protectively around Eddie's tensing shoulders. He slowly recoiled, as to not alarm Eddie. "Well, you're more than welcome here, Spaghetti" he reassured, giving him a slap on the back and a smile. Eddie smiled back, a nervous and wavering little thing.

"Thanks, Rich".

Richie felt his heart pounding in his chest at that. *Fuck*, he was so fucked. All it took was Eddie smiling and he melted into a giant gay puddle. His face flushed and he smiled wider to hide it, pinching Eddie's cheek. "Cutie!" he laughed pulling Eddie into his chest for a

bear hug. Eddie struggled against him, grunting and pushing against him and Richie held him tight.

"Fuck off, Richie! Let me the fuck go! You stink of cigarettes, you chimney!" He yelled, which made Richie laugh harder. But below the humour and irritating Richie's heart was beating faster at having Eddie's body pressed against his. You'd think he'd be used to it by now, but his delirious brain was convinced otherwise. Eddie began laughing too, as if he couldn't help it. They toppled over, Richie on his back and Eddie on top of him. Richie extended his legs out and wrapped them around Eddie's hips, keeping him even more in place. Richie felt on top of the world. Who needed drugs when he had Eddie laughing and pressed into his chest? Eddie suddenly let out a yell, but it wasn't one of frustration. Richie immediately let go as Eddie fell back and clutched his casted arm.

"Beep-fucking-beep, Richie! You forget my arm was broken?" Eddie seethed, still holding his arm to himself.

Richie was still drunk on the feeling of that moment with Eddie, so he was smiling, but he still asked "*Shit*, dude, you okay?"

Eddie exhaled through his nose, then smiled back at him, a little fuller than last time. "I'm okay, obviously. But if you re-break my arm I'm sending the medical bills to you".

Richie snorted at that, and they fell into a sort-of comfortable silence, both smiling to themselves. Richie looked for a long time at Eddie then, watching him in his own little world as he continued to stare at his cast. His hair had become mussed from Richie pinning him against him, his shirt was untucked and his shorts were wrinkled. Eddie adorning this dishevelled look make something in Richie stir and if he wasn't blushing before then he was more than blushing now. He wondered what would happen now if Richie just leaned over, lifted Eddie's chin, and just-

"Boys!" Richie's mom called from the kitchen, "Dad's home! Time for dinner!". And just like that the thought dissipated, the moment was gone, and Eddie and Richie bounded down the steps for supper. Richie all the while was thinking about Eddie smiling against his

chest as he held him tight in his arms. Richie wished he had never let go.

3. i can't help but fall for you

Eddie ended up staying over that night. After Maggie Tozier had a brief phone-call with Sonia Kaspbrack that began with demands that Eddie come home, Maggie had said "If Eddie wanted to come home, he would be home. Now Sonia, I hate to say this but I think it would be best if Eddie stayed the night here, seeing as being at your house only seems to upset him" and that was that. Sonia gave in before telling her she should never again imply that Eddie was not perfectly happy with her again, and that she disapproved of Richie and Eddie's friendship and Richie in general. Maggie hung up after that. Both of the boys were excited, despite the fact they had sleepovers very often (typically with some of the other Losers involved but still) it was always fun. Richie and Eddie's Sleepovers were almost always at Richie's place, for obvious reasons. Most times they watched movies on Richie's small T.V in his room (it used to be in the Tozier's living room before they replaced it with a larger, newer model) until either they both fell asleep, or Richie started getting sick from all the candy he would eat during that time, and Eddie would have to listen to him complain about how his stomach hurt. "You know," Eddie always chided "if you weren't constantly shoving junk down your throat maybe we could enjoy a sleepover for once" to which Richie always responded to with something along the lines of "fuck off" or "that's what she said". Late at night they would curl up in Richie's bed and Richie would try and make Eddie laugh by trying out new Voices or exercising his old ones until Eddie did laugh or he told him to shut the fuck up. Most of the time it was the latter.

Richie tossed Eddie a shirt and sweatpants to sleep in, since Eddie hadn't brought anything for an overnight stay. Eddie inspected the clothes carefully, narrowed his eyes, and then sniffed the shirt. He immediately made a face of disgust and threw both pieces of clothing back at Richie. "Fucking gross, Rich. These are dirty!" He scolded, instinctively wiping his hands on his khakis. "Don't you have anything clean?"

Richie smiled and shrugged, amused at Eddie's frankly melodramatic reaction. "I haven't done laundry in a while", he explained, dropping the shirt and sweatpants back on the ground where he had initially

found them, "besides I'm pretty sure I only wore those once".

Eddie scoffed, "Well it smelled like ass".

"Would you rather sleep naked?" Richie questioned, deadpan but holding back a grin.

Richie saw Eddie's face flush in an instant. His entire face turned red and he stamped his foot like a petulant child. "I can't fucking stand you!"

"Then sit" Richie gestured to the bed.

Eddie made the most fucking *adorable* half-pout-half-glare Richie had ever seen before grabbing the waistband of his pants and undoing the button and zipper on it. "I'll just sleep in my underwear, thank you very-fucking-much. It's more sanitary than wearing whatever bacteria you've got *breeding* in your clothes" he grumbled, tossing off his pants, and falling back onto Richie's bed. He turned his head to look at him "What movie are we watching tonight, by the way?"

Richie's brain short-circuited. It all happened so fast, and now Eddie had no pants and Richie was just staring down at him on his bed like a dumbass. He's seen Eddie in his underwear countless times before. Hell, he's pretty sure he's seen him naked at some point when they were little, but for some reason right now his cheeks burned and his fists gripped his jeans' legs, and fucking shit he needed to say something 'cause Eddie was expecting an answer.

"I was thinking we could watch some spooky movies? You know, since it's October now and all..." he trailed off, trying to look everywhere but Eddie right then.

Eddie groaned dramatically "I fucking hate horror movies, Richie. Are you serious?".

Richie looked back at him now, grinning and composure regained after a silent, long exhale out of his nose "Come on, Eds. You gotta do it! Get in the Halloween spirit!"

Eddie glared at him "Firstly, don't call me that. Secondly, I hate Halloween. It's just a bunch of kids in shitty costumes begging strangers for candy--do you know how many times you hear about poisoned Halloween candy on the news?-- and then you just end up cold and tired by the end of the night and there's a high chance of some older teenager stealing your candy and..." Richie listened to Eddie ramble on about all the reasons he hates Halloween, barely interjecting but letting out a few barely concealed giggles. If he was honest, he could listen to Eddie rant like this all fucking day. Hearing Eddie talk in his fast-paced, rambling way that he always did when he was ranting made Richie feel at home. He didn't know anybody who could speak at a mile-a-minute like Eddie, and that made their back-and-forths so much better. His eyes zeroed in on Eddie's lips as he spoke, moving so fast he's sure not even the most skilled lip-readers in the world could tell what he was saying if they couldn't hear him. A picture wormed its way into Richie's mind; Eddie ranting and Richie kissing him firmly just to shut him up. Fuck, was this going to happen every time he was trying to have a moment with Eddie? It's kind of hard to keep casual and witty with somebody when you can't stop picturing how it would feel to just press their lips to yours.

"-and who even fucking *likes* candy corn--" Eddie pauses as he catches Richie staring blankly at him, "Are you even listening to me?"

Richie finally stops staring at Eddie while standing in the middle of his room like a douchebag and sits down on his bed next to Eddie. "Not at all. What were we talking about again?"

Eddie huffs an almost inaudible "Insufferable" and then he looks up at Richie, sitting up and saying more clearly "Why do I even bother being friends with you?"

Richie doesn't miss the opportunity to pinch Eddie's cheek and plant a wet kiss to his temple "Because you *love* me, Eds" he teases before letting him go.

Eddie rubs the cheek Richie had gripped between his thumb and forefinger "Not a chance. I'm pretty sure I only keep you around cause you're like some weird infection. You're impossible to get rid

of" he pauses again, then smirks "and you make me sick".

Richie's eyebrows shoot up "Did my Eddie Spaghetti just Get Off A Good One? Now that's something the others would never believe if I told them" he laughs, clapping Eddie on the back. Eddie merely rolls his eyes and pushed Richie's side.

"Fuck off, Trashmouth. What movie are we watching?"

They end up watching Beetlejuice, because it's still technically a Halloween movie but it's not scary by Eddie's standards. Richie had begged his mom to buy it when he first saw it in stores, and she had said no. But, his dad later that day came home from work, having stopped by the video store on the way home, and discretely handed the movie to Richie. He said he could thank him by cleaning his room thoroughly, which Richie did happily. Typically they would watch two or three movies, but about three-quarters of the way in, sitting on a mountain of pillows on Richie's floor in front of his T.V in the dark, Eddie slumped against Richie's shoulder and a gentle poke to the cheek proved that he had fallen asleep. Richie finished the movie with a sleeping Eddie leaning on him, trying and failing not to mainly focus on how warm Eddie felt pressed against his side and the soothing sound of his even breaths. He especially tried not to think about how the soft light from the T.V lit up Eddie's face that seemed to highlight how peaceful and *beautiful* he looked. Richie internally gagged at that thought. Calling Eddie beautiful was a bit *too* gay for him, if he was being honest with himself. 'Beautiful' was reserved for sunsets and a perfect Street Fighter run-through, not his tiny dynamite dickhead of a friend.

As the credits rolled, he grabbed the remote to turn his T.V off, causing the entire room to turn dark except for the faint moonlight through Richie's window, and then gave Eddie's shoulder a shake. "Come on, buddy" Richie whispered softly, as it was now late and his parents were both in bed, "It's about time we headed to bed".

"Hmn?" Eddie mumbled groggily, eyelids fluttering open and moving to sit up and away from Richie. He instantly felt cold where Eddie had once been on his side. Richie stood up before grabbing Eddie's hands and hauling him up. They both stumbled for a moment, but

they stayed standing. Eddie, as if on autopilot, wandered out of Richie's room into their bathroom. Richie gave him a spare toothbrush and left him to brush his teeth as Richie went back to his room. He stared at his bed, barely lit by the moonlight, and felt a pit form in his stomach. Oh God, what was he going to do now?

He sat down on his bed and stared at the door. Any minute now Eddie would walk through that door, tired and ready for bed. He scolded himself for not bringing this up or even thinking about this beforehand. His door slowly opened as if on cue and there stood Eddie in just his shirt and underwear, rubbing at his eye sleepily with a closed fist and God, Eddie was so fucking cute.

"Can I take the wall side of the bed this time? You had it last time" Eddie inquired, already making his way towards the bed.

And there it was, the conversation Richie had been dreading. Panicking, Richie shot up and put a hand up. "Uhm, actually, why don't I just take the floor?"

Eddie stopped and peered at Richie quizzically "What?".

Richie's anxiety got the best of him, "Well I-I was just thinking, I-er-we're getting a bit too old to be sl-sleeping in the same bed, right?" he stammered out "I-I mean, that's something little kids do. We're both teenagers now, we can sleep by ou-ourselves".

"...But we always sleep together" Eddie said slowly, as if Richie had forgotten the countless nights they'd spent fucking *cuddling* in his bed. What, did Eddie think he was a moron? He knew that, and he knew they needed to stop that, cause they were big boys now. Big boys didn't need their friend to wrap his arm around his waist and tuck his head into his hair at night while they slept, lest they be mistaken for a couple of fags.

He tried to explain this, in a less harsh way than his mind was presenting to him, to Eddie, "Yeah, but I figured we shouldn't anymore". *'Very articulate, Tozier'* he thought to himself.

"Why?"

"I just said it's cause we're not little kids"

"Yeah but what does that have to do with anything?"

"You don't get it Eddie" Richie pinched the bridge of his nose, took off his glasses, and put them on the nightstand. Eddie was barely in focus now, and Richie was sort of glad for that.

"Why is sharing a bed such a big deal to you?"

"Why is *not* sharing one such a big deal to you?"

"I just don't understand the change!" Eddie started almost yelling, and Richie started worrying his parents would hear them. He was becoming increasingly frustrated. Why was Eddie being such a bitch about this?

"Why are you being such a bitch about this?"

Eddie stared at him, and some unidentifiable emotion passed over his face before he turned away from Richie, arms crossed. "You know what? I don't care. Take the floor".

Richie's heart dropped as it suddenly dawned on him how much of an ass he was being. Eddie came here because him and his mother were fighting. He came here to get away from the yelling and for some comfort. Richie was denying him that by being selfish and being such a fucking fruity queer he couldn't even touch Eddie without feeling like he was set on fire. He was making Eddie feel like shit when he was supposed to be making him feel better. He almost wished Bill was here. Bill always seemed to know what to say to make Eddie feel better, while Richie (the least emotionally intelligent person in the world) was stumbling on his words.

"No, no I'm..." he lets out a shaky breath, "I'm sorry. We can share the bed, if you want".

Eddie doesn't say anything, doesn't look at him, just nods his head. Richie steps aside and looks down. Eddie moves past him and crawls

into bed, pressing into the wall on the other side of the bed, his back facing Richie. Some bitter and spiteful part of Richie wanted to roll his eyes at Eddie's borderline theatrical reactions to this minor argument, but he quickly pushed the thought away. Eddie had every right to be mad, Richie was the asshole here. He climbed into bed after Eddie, careful to leave plenty of space between them. The space on the mattress between them almost felt icy. Richie pulled the sheets over them.

"Goodnight" he whispered.

Eddie, again, didn't respond verbally. Instead he scooched his body back a bit, reached a hand behind him, grabbed Richie's arm, and pulled it over his chest. Richie, almost against his own accord, also moved his body so that his arm rested more comfortably along Eddie, and Eddie's back was pressed against his chest. It was a position they had found themselves in many times before, but this time it was Eddie's way of letting Richie know that he was forgiven. For a moment, he could imagine Cody and Mikey from his science class standing over the bed, snickering and whispering to themselves. He could hear the awful words that rolled off of their tongues, but a sound cut into his imagination like a rock being thrown into a lake. It was soft snoring, coming from Eddie. His chest raised and fell against his arm, and Richie could have died happy right then and there. He felt something swell in his chest and he regretted ever even thinking about sleeping on the floor. Having Eddie close to him like this, peaceful and with nobody speculating and judging. He felt the need to shake Eddie awake, look into his round, dark eyes and tell him that he-

Oh.

Oh no.

Richie felt the need to tell Eddie that he *loved* him.

4. happy just to be with you

Richie hesitantly wandered up to the walkway of Stan's house. His hands were shaking and his breathing was laboured. It could have been caused by the multiple cigarettes he smoked before coming here, but Richie knew better. He knew this was pure fear and frustration.

Over the past week, after his and Eddie's sleepover, Richie has drawn into himself. Being around others meant trying to act Richie Tozier, and being Richie Tozier was becoming more exhausting and difficult by the day. He still hung out with his friends in school, sure, but now he no longer accepted invites to hang out outside of school. Outside-of-school time for Richie had become escape-everybody-so-I-can-mope-in-peace time. He was pretty sure his friends had noticed, but so far nobody had said anything to him. He caught Eddie staring at him a couple times, though, which made him break out into goosebumps each time. Jesus, Eddie couldn't even *look* at him now. Oh, Eddie. Every time Richie thought of him his head swarmed with a million emotions and thoughts, most of them upsetting and overwhelming.

After the earth-shattering realization Richie had about the fact that he *loved* Eddie, Richie spent all of his newly acquired alone time either at the arcade (playing alone, he wasn't risking anything after the whole fiasco with Bowers' cousin) or laying in bed trying desperately to distract himself with comics he had read a million times and movies. There had been a couple nights there where Richie had even cried, fucking *cried*, thinking about the fact that he loved Eddie. It had been so much easier to ignore when Richie had himself half-convinced that this was all just a little crush and it would pass as all crushes do, then he could move on. But this was love. Love didn't pass, love stuck like old, tacky gum on brand-new shoes, or a burr on a wool sweater. Richie was getting emotional over this like some fucking pussy. Richie Tozier didn't cry over stupid things like love, or at least he wasn't supposed to.

But he did.

He cried because Eddie's hair was soft to the touch, and he couldn't help but run his hands all through it. He cried because then Eddie would yell at him for messing up his hair, and God, it was adorable. He cried because when Eddie laughed it reached his eyes, which were deep and brown and tender and every time Richie looked at him he could feel himself falling into them. He cried because Eddie cared about him and the Losers; he was always looking out for them even if it was small things like warning them about a mud puddle they were about to step into. But most of all, he cried because Eddie didn't deserve this. Eddie didn't deserve some perverse freak who disguised himself as a good friend just to get close to him. He didn't deserve some disgusting boy constantly fantasizing about him while Eddie thought their interactions were perfectly platonic and innocent. Richie was disgusting for thinking about Eddie this way, he was sick.

He remembered a night when he woke up sweating from a dream that was all vague images of warm skin and soft lips and Eddie, Eddie, Eddie. When Richie looked down at the incriminating evidence under his sheets he felt like he would puke. He ran to the bathroom and, pitifully lurched over the toilet, let the entire contents of his stomach go. How could he have let that happen? How could he have let his mind think of Eddie like that? Eddie was probably sleeping soundly in his bed, dreaming completely innocuously while Richie was guiltily changing his pyjama bottoms because he couldn't control himself and his stupid, disgusting, *ill* brain. The morning after that it was hard to even look at Eddie without feeling hot shame course through his veins like boiling oil.

It all had become so much that Richie had called up Stan for the first time in a week, and asked if he could come over after lunch. When Stan asked why, Richie avoided the question and just told him he'd tell him when he got there. Stan hesitantly agreed. After they hung up, Richie immediately regretted it. But, he told himself that he had to do this, he had to tell somebody or he might implode. He couldn't go another week sprawled out on his bed humming The Cure songs like some self-pitying douche. He had even smoked through all of his Marlboros that week out of stress. He needed to get it all off of his chest, and Stan was his best friend since they were, what, six years old? Stan cared about him (he was pretty sure), and he had never turned his back on Richie before, and he wouldn't now. Would he?

Richie shook off that very likely possibility, took a deep breath, slapped on a cheerful grin, and knocked quickly three times on the door.

"Coming!" Stan's voice shouted from inside the house. He heard the quick thudding of his steps getting closer and closer to the door before it swung open, revealing Stan in a short-sleeved button-up and jeans. Richie had a running theory that Stan only owned short-sleeved button-ups, and he had yet to be disproven. His gaze probed Richie as he stared him down, silent. Richie knew him well enough that he was trying to analyze him. He was looking for any facial or physical cues that might tip him off to what was going on with Richie. After a couple tense moments of Richie continuing to smile despite Stan's silence, he spoke, "So why are you here again, Richie?"

Richie, grin never faltering, lightly pushed past Stan to enter the house. "What?" he chuckled, "A guy can't just want to hang with his best bud?". It suddenly hit Richie that he was lying for no reason, that he came here for a very specific reason and he was pretty sure he'd never forgive himself if he didn't fulfill it. Lying just felt so much easier than admitting out loud what he had already struggled to say to himself. He stood awkwardly in the front hall, no longer knowing what the hell he was doing.

"A guy can, but I know you came here for more than that. What's on your mind?" Stan asked, ever the one to get straight down to business, as he closed the front door and turned to face Richie with arms crossed and eyebrow cocked accusingly. Richie looked away from his heuristic gaze.

Fuck, what was Richie doing? What was he going to say? "Yeah, you're right Stan. I wanted to tell you that I'm a flaming fag and that I am desperately and overwhelmingly in love with our good friend Eddie Motherfucking Kaspbrack. I visualize us together every day and I touch him as much as I can just to fuel my selfish, perverted need to just *have* him. Why am I telling you this? I don't know! Maybe it'll help me stop crying myself to sleep, but who the fuck knows?!"

Richie definitely wasn't going to say that, but it was practically on the tip of his tongue. He chose his next words carefully, continuing to

smile, "I'll tell you in a minute, but first I'm going to eat your food. Patience, Stan". He entered the Uris' kitchen, Stan right behind him, and started searching through the pantry that Richie had more than familiarized himself with over the years of his friendship with Stan. He spotted a package of Twinkies, and snatched one without hesitation. He took a bite, and then noticed something off about the house. "Where are your parents?". Typically Stan's parents greeted him at the door or called welcomes from another room, so the quietness was strange. He was sort of glad they weren't there, though. Fewer people to try to keep his cool around while he was practically screaming on the inside.

Stan leaned back against the counter across from Richie and shrugged, "Mom's out shopping, Dad's in Portland visiting family".

Richie desperate to keep a conversation going to avoid the one that *had* to be had, asked "What family?"

"My uncle and cousin".

"Is that the cousin that once punched you in the face for accidentally picking up her diary?" Richie snorted.

"No, it's the one that peed in my trashcan that one time at a family reunion".

"Oh yeah, I remember you telling me about him" Richie muttered, then chuckled remembering. Stan laughed a bit too, likely out of politeness. The fact that he would do anything out of politeness to Richie made him feel like the six feet distance between them spread for miles.

And then the silence. Richie finished off his Twinkie, but chewed slowly, trying to delay the inevitable. He couldn't do this. Stan would hate him, Stan would never speak to him again. He wouldn't blame him, why would anybody want to talk to him after finding out? He could picture it now, the words falling out of Richie's mouth, and Stan's face contorting from curious worry to disgust in an instant.

"What the hell, Rich? Are you kidding me? Get the fuck out of my house

you fucking fruit!"

Richie began shaking again, all over this time, and his breaths came heavier and quicker. He couldn't do this, he had to leave, he had to-

"Is this about the graffiti?"

Richie snapped his head up to stare Stan in the eyes, his heart moving a million miles an hour. What the fuck was he talking about?

"What graffiti?" He asked slowly, eyes going from wide shock to narrow suspicion, trying to put together what Stan had just said. Stan looked surprised, then worried, and then he opened his mouth as if to speak, before closing it again into a tight, apprehensive line. "Stan," Richie said, voice wavering, "if you don't tell me what the fuck you mean by 'the graffiti' I'm going to shove a Twinkie so far up your ass". Stan let out a short, quick breath that sorta looked like a laugh if you squinted, then scrunched up his nose in a way that made Richie unable to tell what was going through his head.

"You mean you don't know?" Stan whispered, staring right into Richie's eyes. Why was he whispering? They were alone. Richie shook his head quickly in response, and he felt dizzy. Again, it could have easily been the cigarettes, but it was not. It was his anxiety getting the best of him. Stan's lips formed that tight line again, before he ran his hand down the side of his face and groaned "Fuck, I really did not want to be the one to tell you this, Rich".

"Tell me what? I swear to God, Stan, I am reaching for a Twinkie" Richie punctuated this threat with an arm reaching back towards the snack cupboard. Richie was becoming increasingly aggravated about Stan dancing around this whole graffiti issue.

Finally, Stan told him, "In a few of the stalls in the bathrooms at school, people wrote stuff about you". He paused for a moment, as if thinking about how to phrase his next words, before adding on "Bad stuff. Rachel Fineberg told me there was even some in one of the girls' bathrooms".

Richie, still not satisfied with that answer, stepped toward Stan and

leaned forward, staring him right in the eyes. He felt as though the roles had been reversed, that now *Stan* was holding something back from *him*. "Stanley, what did the fucking graffiti say?"

He saw Stan's Adam's apple bob as he gulped, but kept his eyes trained on Richie's. "They uh, they all said that you were a fag, or something along those lines" he finally revealed, and his expression became one of revulsion, as if the words he had just spoken had left a bad taste in his mouth.

Richie somehow wasn't as surprised as he thought he'd be. It was only a matter of time before it became plain to everyone, but seeing Stan look so offended as he explained this broke Richie's heart in two, and those two sides were fighting. One part knew there was no ignoring the fact now, that they had to talk about it *now*, but the other part was yelling at him that he couldn't tell Stan *now* because look at his face! He's disgusted by the idea, he needed to deny anything and everything until he was out of this situation!

"And do you believe them?" was what he said instead, his voice cracking for a moment. He needed to know before he could say anything else.

That was when Stan averted his eyes and muttered "I don't know".

Richie didn't know whether to be upset, confused, or strangely relieved, so he chose all three. "I don't know" meant that one; Stan didn't immediately dismiss the graffiti and might have even believed it, which, despite the fact that it was true, hurt Richie in a way he couldn't quite explain in words, two; Stan might be saying "I don't know" because he actually *did* believe it, he was just bullshitting for the sake of Richie's dignity, and three; If Stan suspected he might be gay, then he would be less surprised and there for less likely to beat Richie's ass in for it. But Stan would never. He liked to think that he would never.

Richie leaned back, taking a few steps backwards as he deliberately slowed his breathing. In, and out, in and out, like he was helping Eddie with an asthma attack. Eddie...

Richie took one last long breath, thinking to himself, *It's now or never, Tozier. Quit being a pansy.* And then he almost smiled to himself as he followed that up with *Well, I guess you can't.*

"Stan...?" Stan looked back up at him, staring at him with a mix of concern and confusion. He had likely expected Richie to laugh this off, to push his shoulder playfully and say something like *"Now come on Stan the Man, you can't possibly believe that shit! I love pussy more than you love your dumb birds!"*. Instead, Richie clenched his fists and flexed them, willing himself to relax, before saying just above a whisper, "Wh...What if it was true?". Richie felt his eyes well up but he would be damned if he cried in front of Stan while doing this.

Stan's eyebrows shot up behind his curly hair which always stayed flopped over his forehead, and his mouth fell open slightly, looking fairly incredulous. He sputtered out "What do you me-" before Richie cut him off.

"IthinkI'mgay" Richie pushed out all at once, squeezing his eyes shut and trying desperately to not let tears fall. He failed, as a singular, hot tear pulled itself from his left eye and fell down his cheek. He couldn't see Stan, and as far as Richie knew, he was still standing there looking more or less surprised than he expected. Richie's entire body was trembling violently, and as the silence stretched out he felt more alone than he ever had been in his entire life. More alone than that day in the arcade, more alone than when Bill's fist hit his face that fateful day that Eddie broke his arm, and more alone than he had that entire past week, and he deserved it. He was a freak, he was a pervert, he was a fag, he was a fucking disgusting fairy, he was-

Richie heard the sound of Stan's light, but steady steps. He heard them *leave the kitchen*, and Richie's stomach dropped with dread. He opened his eyes, and through the blurry tears he saw that yes, Stan was gone. Stan had left him there after finding out what he was, and now Richie had lost his best friend forever. He should have kept his stupid fucking Trashmouth shut for once in his goddamn life. His legs gave in, they could no longer support the weight of his pain, and he fell on his ass on the floor. Richie put his hands over his face to muffle his sobs as they began to grow louder. How pathetic he looked, huh? Crying on his (ex)best friend's kitchen because he was a

flaming queer. Just what he deserved, he guessed.

The steps then reentered the kitchen, and paused for just a moment, before getting closer and stopping finally in front of him. Two warm hands began to pull his hands away from his face and Richie immediately recoiled his body back, accidentally slamming his head into the pantry door behind him. The pain throbbed, but Richie paid no mind to it as he kept his head ducked down and his hands up protectively in front of him.

"Richie," Stan's voice said sternly to him, firm and unwavering, "look at me". Richie shook his head behind his arms, keeping them up. He couldn't, if he did he would see all the hatred in Stan's eyes and then he wouldn't be able to stop himself from shattering into a million pieces on the floor. "Richie, for fuck's sakes-- here!" and suddenly something soft and thin was being shoved into Richie's flat-open hand. His fingers curled around it and he turned his head slightly to look at it, his sobs turning to hiccups.

It was a simple tissue; and just past that tissue, Richie saw Stan, his expression clearly frustrated. It was not a bitter frustration he saw, the kind he would expect in this situation, but the kind your mom would give you when she told you not to climb that tall tree, and then you did, and she was patching up a nasty arm scrape and sprained ankle you got after falling down. It made sense, he always saw Stan as very motherly, always worrying and chiding. But this didn't make sense. Richie lowered his arms and lifted his head, guard lowered by the strange gesture. He looked uncertainly down at the tissue in his palm, then up at Stan, weirdly not angry, then back down at the tissue.

"...What-" he started.

"Are you going to use that, or are you just gonna stare at me like that with that snot bubble?" Stan interrupted, and gesturing towards the tissue of question. Richie, confused but still fearful of any outburst of Stan's wrath, quickly began wiping at his face with the tissue.

"Y-You're not m-mad?" Richie hiccuped, breaths shaky, shoulders tensing with each exhale. He didn't understand. Stan should hate

him, shouldn't he? He had a queer for a best friend all along. Shouldn't he be angry? Shouldn't he have kicked Richie to the curb by now?

Stan scoffed "Jesus, no. What kind of guy do you take me for?". Richie, not at all expecting that answer, just looked down at the ground, trying to comprehend what was happening. He couldn't say anything in response, partly because he could barely speak through his wavering breaths and partly because he didn't know *what* to say.

Funny that, for once, Richie "Trashmouth" Tozier had nothing to say. No quip, no smart-aleck comment, nothing. Nothing except one final confession:

"I love Eddie" he breathed out like a sigh of relief.

"I know" Stan replied just as near-inaudibly. Richie looked at Stan, wide-eyed and stunned. He thought he had concealed it so well, he made damn sure of it. Stan smiled, lopsided and warm, "Well, I mean, I knew you loved him differently than everyone else, but I couldn't place my finger on the reason or the way. I guess I know now".

"And you don't hate me? I mean, for being queer?" Richie asked, voice cracking and hoarse from sobbing and hiccuping so much.

Stan looked like he had been scorned, "No? It's just who you love, Rich" he shook his head as if disappointed in Richie for thinking this. "You think I care how you get your rocks off? I mean, as long as it's not *actually* Eddie's mom. You know, you almost had me believing it before now".

At that, Richie's awed expression broke as a crooked smile cracked across his face. He snorted, then chuckled, then full-on laughed. He felt such an immense relief wash over him as he laughed, and even more so as Stan began to join in. There they were, two assholes sitting on a kitchen floor cackling at a stupid joke, emotionally vulnerable and open. Nothing had ever felt as good.

When they both stopped to catch their breath, Stan opened his mouth to say something before Richie threw himself onto him to pull him

into the tightest hug he had ever given. He felt Stan stiffen, not used to this much physical affection, before wrapping his arms around Richie's torso. Stan's arms around him felt warm and comforting. Richie felt loved, accepted, and before long he was crying again, but he was smiling.

"Thank you, Stan" he cried into Stan's shoulder.

Stan rubbed his back, soothing and motherly as he always was, "Not a problem, Trashmouth".

5. where'd the hours go?

Notes for the Chapter:

apologies for this being so late! I've been going through a bit of a depressive episode as of late and I didn't want to force myself to write as I knew it wouldn't be great. I hope the fact that this is an extra-long chapter makes up for its quality :}

Richie was practically vibrating in his seat with excitement. He kept drumming his hands on the car's dashboard, to which his mother would glance in annoyance at him, before shaking her head and turning her gaze back to the roads. Richie tried to keep calm, but he was grinning ear to ear during the entire car ride.

A couple of days before, Bill had gotten a letter from Bev, saying she convinced her aunt to let her come to Derry for a weekend. She was coming on Friday night and leaving Sunday evening. They were lucky enough that Halloween fell on that Saturday she was staying, so they could all celebrate together. It was now seven-o'clock on Friday, and Richie was getting driven to Bill's house where all the Losers were meeting up for a sorta Halloween Sleepover. Richie was beyond thrilled for it. He missed Bev more than anything, and seeing her again was something he couldn't wait for. It would also give him a chance to spend more time with Mike, who he didn't see as often as he'd like to due to the fact that Mike was home-schooled.

Maggie Tozier pulled into the Denbrough's driveway, and before she could park Richie had already unbuckled himself and was scrambling into the backseat to grab his bag. He hardly heard her wishing him goodbye before he was out of the car and bolting to the front door. He didn't even knock, just strode right in to Bill's house; a man on a mission. He suddenly saw a blur of denim and ginger hair bolt into the front hall from an unforeseen place and then he was tackled into a tight, squeezing hug. He made no hesitation before hugging Beverly back just as tightly.

"Wow, Bev, you realize I'm not Bill, right?" he chuckled as they both stood there swaying in contentment. Beverly let out a bubbly laugh in

response. There was no denying the true friendship between Richie and Bev, the comfort and siblinghood they found in each other. Stan was Richie's best friend, sure, and Richie would literally throw himself in front of a bus for Eddie, but he saw Beverly as the sister that he never had. It was hard to explain in words, but all the Losers knew and felt it.

Bev pulled away and began to rock back on her heels, having a hard time containing her own excitement. She looked shorter, Richie observed. Maybe he was just getting taller, but it had been only two months since they last saw each other and he found that instead of looking up at her, he was nearly eye-to-eye with her. Her hair was the exact same as when he last saw her, just like her smile and the smattering of freckles that covered her face. It was nice to see that she hadn't changed too much outside of Derry, despite the short time between their meetings. He shivered thinking about the last he saw of her in person. He had looked back as he was walking away from that field, blood still dripping from his palm and a heavy heart weighing down each step he took. He remembered his eyes sweeping over Ben, Beverly, and Bill, muttering a soft goodbye. Bev looked pensive, her eyes cast down, only glancing up once to look at him for one last time.

Bill was the one who told him she had moved away a couple of days later. Needless to say, he was pissed he never got to see her off, and that Bill kept it from him. Bill explained that Bev didn't want a big deal made of it, that it already hurt her enough to leave, but she couldn't stay. *"Not after everything that happened to her"*, he remembered Bill saying lowly, as if it were some big secret that he wasn't supposed to tell. Though frustrated, Richie silently forgave him by offering him a cigarette after fishing a couple out of his pocket, and while typically Bill would deny one, he took it and slipped it between his lips as if it was a regular habit. They were all a little shaken up, those couple of weeks after it all happened, though, so it's no surprise Bill took up Richie's offer of a distraction from his thoughts, despite it being a simple one.

A second laugh from Bev shook him back to the present, "Thank god you're here, I've been stuck here for an hour with these lame-asses" she stuck a thumb in the general area of the living room. She then

beamed and grabbed his wrist, leaving no room for response, "Come on, we just ordered pizza!". She led him back into the living room, practically skipping all the way.

The room was dim, except for a floor lamp in the corner, lighting the room up in a warm glow that was easy on the eyes. It was dark out now, so it was all soft yellow light spreading out from that one corner keeping the room from being pitch-blackness. Bill had pushed the coffee table out of the way, making room for a sea of blankets and cushions strewn on the floor between the T.V and the large couch, being inhabited by Bill and Ben, with an empty spot between the two that Richie assumed had been previously occupied by Beverly before he showed up. Eddie was sat on the floor between Bill's legs, head back to talk to him. Stan was sitting close to the T.V with Mike, sorting through movies as if they were filing through important insurance paperwork, muttering to each other with their eyes glued to each movie they examined. Bev flopped back on her spot on the couch as everybody turned their heads to look at Richie. They all gave enthusiastic shouts of greeting.

Except for Stan, who let out a comically dramatic sigh of relief. "Thank God!", he exclaimed, "Richie, we need help picking a movie. Mike wants a horror movie for Halloween but I was just thinking something, y'know, *nice*, like The Princess Bride".

Without any equivocation, Richie promptly responded "Horror, all the way" as he sat himself next to Eddie, his shoulder pressed against Bill's shin and head bumping against Bev's knee, "What do you think I am? A pussy? I can handle some gore and terror, unlike *you*, Stan".

Eddie huffed, turning his head away from Richie as if shunning him, "Yeah, of course *you* picked horror. You know me and Stan don't like those movies".

"Yeah Richie, I thought you were going to be on my side 'cause of that!" Stan pouted, but still he picked up a copy of The Shining, his eyes mulling over its case like a captivating novel.

Richie rolled his eyes, "Sorry if I'm trying to get into the Halloween spirit the *day* before Halloween, Stanley".

"All I know is that *I* want an excuse to stay up until three in the morning," Bev interjected, "and whether that's from nightmares or thinking of a good story I don't care", and then it was like they were all back in the clubhouse, joking and pretending like the kids they were supposed to be. They joked, argued, and taunted, all the while bearing smiles that never wavered or fell. This was the effect of their lucky seven brought back to full strength with Beverly's return, Richie would think to himself.

The loud chime of the doorbell caused a surprised silence to fall among the group, before Bill jumped off of the couch, exclaimed the words "P-Pizza time!", and raced out of the living room. A collective "woo!" came from the rest of them before they went on talking and laughing. Richie could hear over the talk that Bill was stuttering through a thank you to the delivery person, and that was soon followed by the smell of meat and cheese wafting into the house. Even as they ate, the chatter did not cease. It was all mostly Bev-centric, asking what it was like in Portland, how school was there.

"It's fine" she simply responded, "The people there are way less blatantly shitty, at least".

"Of course fucking they are!" Eddie asserted, "There's no place worse than Derry when it comes to people".

"There's no place worse than Derry, period!" Richie added, mouth full of pepperoni and cheese. That incited chuckles and noises of agreement.

"I'll drink to that!" Bev said, reaching into her large gym-bag next to the couch. She produced a white grocery bag, much to the confusion of the boys, swinging it in her hands and grinning. Everybody watched her curiously as she set it in her lap, hearing a heavy glass clink.

Ben gasped as he looked into the bag over her shoulder, "Bev, is that-"

"Yup!" Bev shouted triumphantly, pulling out a couple of bottles of beer by their necks and waving them above her head like trophies. She then got up, handing out the bottles like communion wine to the

Losers. She had a total of seven bottles; one for each Loser. Richie watched Bev hand Eddie a beer, who accepted it nervously and then stared at it as if she had just handed him an invitation to his own funeral. Richie, unlike the rest of them, grinned and eagerly took his bottle from Beverly. He stared at the bottle; a Budweiser. He had beer once or twice before in his life, typically only on special occasions like getting an extra-good report card or New Year's. He didn't mind the taste, really, but he knew a lot of people his age didn't feel the same. He glanced at Eddie, who was gripping the bottle so hard Richie almost worried he might break it.

He nudged him with his elbow lightly to get his attention, letting him know to ease up. "Come on, Spaghetti, it's just a beer!" he coaxed, then chuckled at Eddie slamming the bottle down on his lap and death-glaring at him. He noogied Eddie to tease him a little more, because in his head he was yelling *'please don't stop looking at me with that adorable angry expression, I'd give anything to have you stare at me forever'*. Eddie squirmed under his arm as Richie continues his assault on his skull, until he finally broke free, still flailing his arms around in petty aggravation.

"Beep-beep, Richie! You know we could get in trouble for this shit?" He whined, adjusting his hair, which was now stuck in a million different directions from the noogie-ing. While Eddie was distracted by his sore scalp and artificial bed-head, Richie looked over his shoulder in time to see Bev sit back down on the couch and hand the last beer, other than her own, to Ben, who looked as apprehensive as he did in awe.

"Bev, this is really cool of you, but Eddie's right. I mean we're only thirteen," Ben gestured to the bottle, as if it was responsible for the fact that they were underage, "we could get in really bad trouble".

Beverly just giggled, "How? Bill's parents are out until late tonight, and we're each only having a bottle. How drunk could we get?"

"But-" Ben tried to interrupt, before Beverly placed two fingers over his lips.

"No buts, Benjamin. I want us to try this. It'll be fun" She smiled warmly at him, the way that would make anybody trust her, "Okay?".

Ben turned beet red, nodding with Bev's fingers still to his quivering lips. "O-Okay, yeah..." he whispered anxiously. Richie snorted, to which Ben side-glanced him with a pouty, flustered expression. God, he was whipped. As was Bill, but at least Bill wasn't complaining. In fact, he looked rather excited, drumming his fingers on the bottle in anticipation.

A sharp inhale of pain came across the room, and everybody looked over to see Mike running his fingers across his palm soothingly. It reminded Richie of the scar along his palm, which he also began to rub mindlessly. Mike smiled through his embarrassment "Bill, do you have a bottle opener? I just remembered these don't open too well by hand". Bill ran into the kitchen to find the bottle, and Richie glanced over at Stan, who was scooting over to him and Eddie.

"Feeling stoked, Stan the Man?" He asked, wiggling the bottle in his hand at Stan, "Have you ever even drank more than a sip of wine? Wait, do Jews drink wine at Synagogue?". He was yanking Stan's chain, he knew communion wasn't a part of Jewish services, but he was genuinely curious about whether Stan had drunk anything actually. He remembered once when they were little kids, maybe five or six, Stan had accidentally mistook his father's whisky for juice and took a large swig. After realizing his mistake, he had yelled in disgust and dropped the glass, breaking it into a million pieces. Donald had run in and saw his son spitting into a potted fern with a broken glass of whisky shattered across the floor of their sunroom. Richie had to stand by while Stan got the shit spanked out of him, and had asked his mom to pick him up early shortly after. Stan was still chugging water to get rid of the taste when he left. Since then, Stan couldn't even smell anything like whisky without making a pained expression.

Stan just rolled his eyes lazily before landing them on the Budweiser resting on his crossed ankles. "Not beer, no" he said, "Sometimes some wine or something on holidays, but even then it's just a half glass". He then looked up, past Richie at Eddie, who had continued to hold the bottle like as if he was trying to choke it to death. "What about you, Eddie?" he inquired.

Richie caught the sideways glance Eddie gave at Bill's empty spot on the couch, before his mouth slid diagonally across his face into a strange grimace of discomfort. "Well I-

"I got it!" Bill called from down the hall, his words becoming increasingly closer before he slid into the doorway and presented the bottle opener to the room. Beverly made a show of grabbing it from his hands and politely going around to the Losers to pop the caps off of their bottles. Each one gave a satisfying hiss of rushing air, before the *snap* and the cap being discarded to the floor. The second Richie's cap had dropped he took a large drink of his beer. It had been a while though since he'd last had any, so the bitter taste was almost a shock. He tried to hold back any distasteful noises trying to crawl out from his mouth, but ended up sputtering a bit instead, some of the beverage dribbling down his chin onto his shirt.

Eddie made a sound of obvious annoyance, fully turning his head to look at Richie and actively *not* at Beverly opening his beer. "That's what you get for showing off, jackass" he stated, frustrated.

Richie laughed the mild humiliation off, as always, "Like you could drink *any* of that stuff, Eds".

Eddie's cap fell onto the blanket he was sitting on as Bev moved on to open Bill's drink, and his eyes darted between the now-open bottle and Richie's smug grin. Richie watched Eddie's eyes move rapidly, flashing with a million different emotions in a millisecond before he yelled indignantly "Oh yeah, asshole? Watch this!" and then he shoved the bottle to his lips and began chugging.

"Holy fucking *shit*!" Richie yelled in surprise, laughter leaping from his throat with each word. Eddie didn't stop, just kept his eyes squeezed shut as his barely visible Adams' apple moved up and down as he drank and drank and-

Wow, Eddie should really not be doing this. Richie wanted to stop him, but he was honestly too stunned. He knew Eddie would not want to be shown up by Richie, but the way he threw away all of his initial nervousness just to shut him up had him floored. Honestly, the confidence suited him. *It's kinda hot* a small voice in his subconscious noted with strange interest.

"Eddie, don't!" Stan yelled, and then he reached across Richie and pulled the Budweiser down and away from Eddie's lips, forceful but careful not to spill any on Eddie or the blanket. He placed the bottle

off to the side, but still stared at him with the same kind of awe that all the Losers were wearing.

The emotions on Eddie's face turned from anger directed at Stan, to shock, to a very recognizable expression of intense chagrin and regret. He coughed and heaved, bent into himself. "How do the movies make it look so *easy*?" He mumbled between gagging and hacking. Richie's worry for him spiked, and he reached out to touch his shoulder in comfort before another hand got there before him. Mike was rubbing Eddie's shoulders soothingly as Ben held the plastic bag Bev had brought the drinks in under Eddie's bent head in a second. It was then that he *did* throw up, an awful retching sound ripped from him as pizza and beer-looking mush spilled out of him. The concoction pouring gruesomely from his mouth almost reminded him of-

"Wanna play Loogie?"

Richie shuddered and reeled his hand back, as if it *was* that apparition from the Neibolt house shuddering and slumping against Mike's shoulder as Beverly took the puke-filled bag, grimacing, out to the trash.

"E-E-Eddie, you can't j-just down a b-buh-beer like th-th-huh-at" Bill chided quietly, still sat on the couch, watching on with concern, "Yuh-You should kn-know that".

Eddie's head whipped to stare Bill right in the eyes as he yelled hoarsely "You're one to fucking talk, Bill!".

Everybody visibly stilled at the outburst, fixing their gazes on Eddie's face. Well what the hell did that mean? He pulled away from Ben and Mike, standing up on his feet. Sensing that Eddie would fall, Richie was already standing before Eddie tripped over air and fell against his side. It hit him then, just how short Eddie was compared to him. Richie was slowly, but very surely, gaining height over the months while Eddie's last growth spurt was last spring when he had gone from 4'11 to 5'1. He remembered Eddie proudly presenting how his head was level with the cupboards in his house now, before accidentally hitting himself in the head with the cupboard door. It was sort of cute how Eddie's head was pressed in to his shoulder and

how his fingers were gripping his t-shirt like he was trying to rip it off. Richie bit his tongue to avoid making any comments out loud about that.

"Woah, careful Spaghetti! If you keep holding on to me like this I might get the wrong idea" he teased, but despite his words he still kept a firm grasp on Eddie's shoulders, holding him close. Only to keep him from falling, of course.

"Shut the fuck up, Richie" Eddie muttered bitterly, tightening his grip on the fabric of Richie's shirt, "I just threw up, leave me alone". Richie chuckled quietly, just a few short breaths out of his nose as he sat both of them down to evade Eddie stumbling again. Eddie was still latched to him, and Richie made no movement to get him off. He almost could have enjoyed the moment, but then it was silent in the room. Everybody stayed entirely quiet, awkwardly shuffling where they each sat, not knowing where to take things from there. Richie had always hated silence, it always made him feel like something was wrong, like *he* was doing something wrong because he wasn't filling the gap of sound with sarcastic comments about Eddie's mom or dick jokes. Luckily, Beverly came back in to save the day.

"Woah, I leave for two seconds and it's dead quiet", she announced from the doorway. She was smiling easy even as she took a noticeably tentative step into the room, as if testing the emotional waters, "What, are we doing Eddie's funeral service?".

"Not yet, unfortunately" Richie piped up, shaking Eddie to prompt him into sitting up. Eddie's face was frustrated, but sober and awake, much to everybody's relief. Richie was unsure about how he'd feel if Eddie passed out on him this early in the night just from blowing a few chunks. Then again, it would have been unlike him to do so. Despite everything his mom said, Eddie was remarkably resilient when it came to things like this. He beat the shit out of a clown with a broken arm and vomit and gray water all over him, for Christ's sake, the kid could take a bit of mild upchucking.

"Oh fuck you guys, I do *one* reckless thing and you guys are already writing my obituary" he complained. He folded his arms in petty annoyance, letting go of Richie's shirt but still stubborn in his efforts to keep his head glued to his shoulder. His elbow bumped Richie's

ribs lightly, and he thought stupidly for a moment that Eddie might have felt his quickening heartbeat through that brief touch. He definitely couldn't have, and if he did he probably would have scooted five feet away from Richie.

"Can you blame us, Eddie?" Mike asked, gleam in his eye, "I sort of expected Richie to go ham on the booze, but never *you*".

"It was because Richie said I couldn't drink any of it!" Eddie protested flailing his arms above his head to punctuate his point. If Eddie noticed that he smacked Richie in the face, he didn't react. He didn't even scooch away from him at all, still shoulder-to-shoulder with Richie despite the fact that *that* was getting in the way of Eddie's signature way of communicating through exaggerated limb-waving. "I had to prove him wrong!" he added on, becoming exceedingly defensive over one beer.

"But did you, Eddie?" Beverly asked, eyebrow cocked as she took a leisurely sip of her beer. She had some practice at this whole "alcohol" thing it seemed.

"That's not the fucking *point*, Bev!" Eddie cried, finally no longer fully pressed into Richie. He was slowly moving himself towards Beverly as she teased him about being a lightweight, as if somehow pulled in by her even as she was mocking him. It made Richie realize how warm Eddie was, and how cold his side was feeling now, how it always felt without Eddie. God, it was like Richie could barely function without him now. What was he becoming?

For a moment after he ripped his gaze away from Eddie not-so-subtly hiding a smile behind that damn adorable *pout* he always does, he got the feeling of being watched. The kind that buzzes along your skull as that sudden awareness of presence kicks in and you fling into fight-or-flight. He glanced around nervously and caught Stan's eyes, still sitting tight next to him with an open but full beer bottle sitting between his folded legs. Stan raised a knowing eyebrow at him and Richie lowered his eyes sheepishly.

Ever since Richie came out to him, Stan had treated him no differently than before. He never was overly awkward and he never made some big deal out of Richie's sexuality, but he did openly

discourage Richie from referring to himself as things like "fag" and "pansy" out loud, and by discourage he meant Stan would whack him along the back of the head if he heard *"intolerant, self-deprecating language"* come from his mouth. It was nice to have somebody to know, to no longer have to bury his secret deep down inside the deepest parts of his brain and instead be able to ramble and talk about it with someone else. It didn't make him feel any less worse about it, as much as Stan tried to convince him he was fine and perfectly normal. What did Stan know, anyway? He was straight, he had no guilt that came with looking a person he liked in the eyes and feeling butterflies. He was a nice support system, sure, but Richie wasn't healing. He wasn't getting better. He would never get better.

At least he knew Stan would still love him despite his sickness.

The rest of the night continued without as much drama, Eddie didn't touch any more alcohol for the rest of the night, and Stan and Ben lightly sipped on their beers while everybody else treated theirs like a cold pop on a hot summer afternoon. Richie finished first, considering himself the one who could hold his liquor the best, and loudly bragging about it.

"It's cause you're all tall and shit, it doesn't affect you as much" Beverly explained, smile slanted awkwardly on the side of her face. Bill got a little giggly after his beer, chuckling loudly at every mildly funny thing anybody said. He wasn't short by many means, but he was even more stick-thin than Stan or Richie, so that probably affected his tolerance for the stuff. Once they were all done, or insisted they shouldn't or wouldn't drink any more, they rinsed out the empty bottles and put them back in Bev's bag. *"We can't put them in your recycling, your parents would see!"* she had told Bill when he tried to throw his bottle into their garbage bin.

They had gone through a few movies (all horror, to Stan and Eddie's blatant dismay), and as the clock ticked endlessly, everybody slowly settled into their spots in the room. Bill had left the couch to allow Ben and Beverly to lay on opposite sides of it, instead finding a space next to Mike close to the T.V where Richie heard them lowly chatting all night. Stan was sitting up against Bev's side of the couch, smiling and talking with her about whatever as Ben made the occasional comment or two, content to lay down and observe for the most part.

That left Richie and Eddie, lying together amidst the sea of thick blankets and plush pillows. Not too long after the last movie, *The Evil Dead* (which terrified Eddie especially, making him bury his face in the nearest pillow and refuse to look up until the movie had come to a close), at around two, most of their friends had fallen asleep. Stan had fallen asleep first halfway through *The Shining*, surprising Richie. Stan had always been high-strung, especially when watching intense movies, but he had just passed out. He guessed it was the presence of having all the Losers together, the serenity that came with their lucky seven being reunited. Richie felt it too, and it covered the room like an old homemade quilt, cozy and familiar. Beverly and Bill were the next ones out, followed by Ben (*"I just really can't wait for Halloween, so I'm going to sleep now"* he had said), then Mike. Soft snores bounced quietly around the room as Richie and Eddie continued to talk long after most of the others had drifted off.

Part of Richie was more than happy to have all of Eddie's attention on him as they smiled and joked, but he knew better than to ignore why he had yet to fall asleep. His eyelids had been drooping for half-an-hour, but he was desperate to stay awake.

As far as Richie knew, all the Losers were plagued by the nightmares, by the *memories*. Even when Pennywise was (presumably) dead, he still had a way of worming his way into your mind and driving you near insane. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, sweat-soaked and crying, only remembering flashes of white grease paint and sharp teeth. Sometimes he heard his friends scream from behind those doors, and almost all the time he wasn't quick enough. Every time he believed it was real.

Richie turned on his side to face Eddie laying on his back, eyes gazing up at the ceiling. The lights had long since been turned off for the night, so only the light of the moon peeking between the curtains was keeping the room from being completely dark. It reminded Richie of that sleepover he and Eddie had a month back, where Richie found himself *loving* Eddie. His feelings had only gotten stronger since that moment, and it was killing him slowly.

"I think you should tell him" Stan had told him a few days back during a study session in Richie's room.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Richie had responded, baffled at how Stan could even suggest that. What was he thinking?

"I'm just saying, it would be a huge load off".

"Yeah, and an even bigger load would be added on," Richie protested, temper rising *"Eddie would hate me. He doesn't even like me back, so what's the point?"*.

Stan sighed, dropping his math textbook, *"The point is that he would understand. Even if he doesn't like you back-"*

"He doesn't" Richie interjected, teeth gritting. He had desperately wanted to drop the subject.

"Right. Anyway, even if he doesn't like you back, he would never hate you. Maybe you'd be able to finally be able to get over it".

Richie stayed silent after that, not willing to expand the topic anymore. Stan let him stay quiet on the matter, only shaking his head and picking up where he left off on a polynomial.

This memory echoing in his head, Richie's eyes traced over Eddie's face. Over the slight upturn of his nose, the light dusting of freckles over the ridge of his nose and cheeks, his hair falling just slightly over his forehead. He was adorable. More than that, he was near angelic. It made heartbeat quicken and his face heat up in a way that made him feeling guilty once again.

Eddie's eyes snapped over to meet his, and Richie almost looked away to avoid the overwhelming to grasp his face and rid of the space between them.

"Why are you staring at me?" He rightfully asked, nose scrunched.

"Cause you're cute" was his reply, and he'd be damned if it wasn't the truth. But Eddie didn't know that.

Eddie's hand reached out and pushed at Richie's face playfully as he muttered "shut the fuck up". Then he looked back at the ceiling and sighed. "I wish I hadn't done that" he whispered.

"It's fine Eds, I don't think you got too many cooties from touching my face-"

"No, not that, moron" Eddie snapped, then sighed again even louder, "I mean I wish I hadn't chugged that beer".

Richie chuckled "Well I'm sure your stomach and liver are in agreement".

"You don't get it" Eddie huffed, "It's cause of Bill".

Richie's confusion peaked, and he cocked his head to display this, "I'm pretty sure Bill wasn't the one who told you to fucking down that Budweiser".

"Did Bill ever tell you what happened that first week after It happened?" Eddie asked, his voice wavering just slightly.

Richie shook his head, and Eddie nodded his in response, pressing his lips together into a flat line. He turned his head towards Richie, but his gaze fell past him and onto a sleeping Bill, starfished on his back with his arm and leg flung over Mike. "That week was rough for all of us, Bill especially" Richie nodded in acknowledgement and agreement. His brother had died, he was grieving. "I stopped by his house one evening after supper, hoping to stay over. I hadn't called beforehand because his parents were used to me, right?" Richie kept nodding along. "Anyway, so I go into his house and his parents aren't home. I don't really care, so I go up to Bill's room. I knock on his door, no answer, so I go in and..." Eddie suddenly stopped his story, taking that moment to look him in the eyes. Richie saw a storm of conflict in them.

"Go on" he encouraged.

Eddie took a deep breath, gearing up to say /something/, and continued, "I go into his room, and Bill is just, like, slumped on the floor. He almost looked dead and..." his breath shuddered, "and there was this empty bottle of rum on the floor".

Richie held up a hand to stop him, "Woah, are you telling me Bill got fucking blackout wasted?".

Eddie glared at him, "Let me fucking finish, and I'll tell you".

Richie let him continue.

"So anyway, I start panicking, and I run over and shake him on the shoulder. He's still awake, thank God, but he's really out of it. I ask him if he drank that whole bottle of booze, he says it was already mostly done when he had it. I ask him if he's thrown up and he said '*no, but I'm fuckin' about to*' so I haul ass dragging him to the bathroom and try to get him to puke. He finally does, and when he's finished I yell at him. I mean, why the fuck did he do that?" Eddie shook his head sadly as he recalled, "It was stupid to ask him that while he was half passed out laying against his bathtub. He told me..." he paused, lip trembling and tears noticeably brimming along his eyelids, "he told me he wished it was him instead of Georgie," Richie's heart dropped into his stomach, "and he thought the rum would take it all away, even for just a bit. He knew that's what his parents did when they got sad" a tear ran down Eddie's cheek before he hastily brushed it away, sniffing, "I asked him never to do that again, especially if I wasn't there to help him. He could have hurt himself, and he was way to young to resort to alcoholism anyway" Eddie laughed softly and sadly. "He said he would, but I could never get that image out of my mind. Him sitting there, alone and *scared*..." his hand found Richie's and he squeezed it. "and then I went and did the same thing just because you goaded me into it after I wasn't there for him. And then I *snapped* at him tonight when he was just worried about me. God, I feel like a shit friend".

Richie quickly pulled Eddie closer to him by his hand. "No, Eds. That's not the same thing" Eddie wouldn't look him in the eyes, "Trying to get wasted alone to avoid feeling sad is not the same thing as letting a little bit loose with your friends. It's not even remotely the same. You're both fine and safe now, neither of you are gonna fall down that hole again", and he meant it. He was there for Eddie, there for Bill, even. That week had been tough on all of them, Eddie couldn't take blame for how Bill tried to cope. It wasn't his fault, none of this was ever his fault.

Eddie fell quiet, so Richie simply rubbed the back of his hand soothingly with his thumb. It was rare to see Eddie truly *melancholy* like this. It was rare to even have him open up like this at all. Richie

treasured it. He let his eyes fall shut to the rhythm of Eddie's soft breathing slowly evening out. When he opened them again, Eddie was fast asleep with his head tucked under Richie's chin. His heart was pounding a million miles a minute.

The words choked their way up from his throat, sickly and sacred at the same time. This was the only time he would ever let himself say it out loud to him, he felt it so deeply in that moment that it was hard to think about anything else.

"I love you" he uttered, the words finally being let out into the world. He waited for Eddie to look up at him, disgusted, to push him away, before he remembered that he was asleep.

Stan was right, it was a huge load off.

6. there's a storm for every spring

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello! It has been exactly a month since I've last updated. I'm really sorry I kept you guys waiting, but school and my personal life have been taking a toll on my mental health, and I hate forcing myself to write because I don't create the best content I can that way.

So, I've decided that these updates will be no more than one month apart. Some updates may come sooner, but I will try to make sure that at least once a month y'all will get a new chapter.

Thank you all so much for being patient and continuing to enjoy my story! I'll see you all again in a month or less.

I'll let you get to the fic now :)

Richie felt warm as the late afternoon sun beat down on his face pleasantly, the air like a thick quilt of comfort and tranquillity. He almost felt weightless, like he was floating in a bubble, had it not been for the refreshingly cool water of the stream which he had his toes dipped in keeping him sort-of grounded. The sky was a beautiful orchestra of oranges and reds and purples, like something out of a painting. Cicadas buzzed off in the distance, along with some chirping crickets; the only things, it seemed, standing in the way of complete silence.

Richie leaned back on his elbows and tilted his head back to the sky, watching puffy yellow-tinted clouds drift by. He began to make out shapes; first a grape bunch, then a sleeping dog, then a flower, then a fire breathing dragon. He felt more peaceful than he had in months in this place.

But where was this place, exactly...?

Before Richie could even try to answer this question, a silhouetted figure was looming over him menacingly. Richie jumped in surprise, his elbows coming out from under him, causing him to fall fully on his back. But, as his eyes adjusted, Eddie's own stared right back at him. He cocked his head in amusement.

"Didn't mean to startle you, Rich" he said, still leaned over him. He was wearing that yellow t-shirt he owned that was a little big on him, which Richie never remembered hanging off his shoulders like *that*, tucked into those red track-shorts that Richie had an intense love-hate relationship with.

Richie sat himself up, dusting off his shirt and looking back at Eddie, physically unable to look away. "It's fine, I just didn't expect to see you here, Spaghetti", he grinned, then patted the grass next to him as an invitation to sit down.

Eddie didn't comment on Richie calling him Spaghetti, which was odd, and instead took up Richie's offer and plopped down on the grass next to him, one leg tucked under him and one with a foot in the water, which he was staring down at. "Well I *was* at the clubhouse, but nobody was around so I went wandering," he explained, looking up at Richie, "and then I found you".

The way Eddie said that last bit so softly and sweetly made Richie's heart skip multiple beats, but he was used to this. He could keep his cool as he replied: "Yeah, now you have to wait for one of our other friends to save you from the Trashmouth".

Eddie kept his eyes on Richie as he smiled. "Nah, I like spending time

with you, Richie". A phrase Richie thought he'd never hear come from Eddie's mouth. His heartbeat, instead of skipping, began to quicken his pace. He could feel it in his fingertips.

"You don't mean that Eds" he tried to brush it off, looking away from Eddie and adjusting his glasses, trying to look as blasé as possible.

"I do" Eddie insisted with such sincerity as he continued to look at him that Richie couldn't help but look back once more. He caught his eyes, seeing a swirl of adoration and love in his eyes that Richie had only seen reserved for Bill when they were younger. The light of the sunset perfectly hit his face, casting him in a beautiful golden glow that brought out the rosy tint of his cheeks and the freckles that looked as if they were each carefully placed by an artist in the creation of the masterpiece that was Eddie Kaspbrak. The dark brown of his eyes had an extra shine and the sunlight shone on his hair like a halo, blinding Richie to everything that wasn't him. The shadows that lined his face and dipped into his collarbones reminded Richie one of those old sculptures in art museums that were supposed to be like the peak of beauty. The sculptors that had made those should have seen Eddie right then, beautiful and divine. There should be songs about this feeling swelling in Richie's chest, poetry about the perfectness of this moment, staring into Eddie's dark, soft eyes.

That thought made him realize that he had been staring and had been silent for way longer than usual or necessary. He cleared his throat, whipping his head away from Eddie and taking his glasses off to wipe at them with his shirt. It gave his hands something to do and a reason to no longer look at Eddie.

"Sorry" Richie mumbled, hoping he wasn't making him uncomfortable.

Eddie turned away as well, making Richie's breath a little easier to catch. But he also laughed so musically, not helping Richie's situation at all. "It's fine, Richie, it's not like you're hiding anything from me", Eddie stirred the stream with his foot slowly.

Richie's heart went from moving at the speed of sound to completely still. "W-What do you mean?". He glanced up, then gathered his courage and looked at Eddie, staring off into the hazy distance.

Eddie's face remained content and serene, his eyes never leaving the darkening horizon, "Well I mean I already know that you like me".

'Fuck, oh fuck' ' Richie thought, 'Oh fucking fuck no fuck fucking shit fuck oh no oh god how did he-'

Eddie placed a gentle hand onto Richie's, soothing and still calm. He must've been able to see his panic, but then again he wasn't sure he could hide it too well anymore. "It's okay, Richie" he soothed as tears began to well in Richie's eyes, tears of a scared kid terrified of getting in trouble for doing something he shouldn't be doing. Richie could hardly think. His chest was heaving with each panicked breath he took, confused and frightened. Eddie gripped Richie's hand a little tighter, bringing him back to the moment. "Relax, Rich. It's okay, it's fine, I-" and then Eddie glanced away, his face reddening significantly. Richie was still caught in his fear, so he barely processed the action as anything but embarrassment at having to be around him. "I like you too, Richie, it's okay" he whispered, staring into Richie's soul with those gorgeous doe-eyes.

Richie's racing mind screeched to an instant stop. *Everything* came to

a stop. The stream ceased to flow, the minimal breeze became nonexistent, even the crickets and cicadas silenced in the wake of this revelation. He... *liked* Richie?

“You do?” Richie whispered, astonished and hopeful and incredulous all at once. There was no way this was real. Eddie would never like a useless dickbag like him, even if he somehow was a queer too.

“Can you kiss me?” Eddie asked boldly, already leaning just slightly into Richie. Richie’s mind was full of alarm bells but damn if Eddie’s lips weren’t calling to him. He felt drunk, loose and uninhibited in doing whatever he pleased. He was going to take this chance, or else there might not have ever been another. This was strange to him, the emotions were overwhelming but his thoughts were muddy and distant, like a mirage.

Richie leaned toward Eddie, ready to throw it all away for this one fleeting moment. Each second their lips got closer and closer and he was screaming on the inside. This was it, what he had dreamed of for what felt like forever finally coming to be, and just as they were nose-to-nose...

Richie stopped breathing. He *couldn’t* breathe. Eddie’s hand squeezed around his neck as he kept Richie there, still and unforgiving. He stared at Richie with ice-blue eyes that he only could have remembered seeing in the dim rooms of a decrepit clown-infested house. His hands stayed slack at his side, though, his fight was gone. He could never hurt Eddie, never, even as he just stared as his sharp-toothed grin grew wider and wider and his hand on Richie’s throat became tighter and tighter.

“Filthy fucking fag” Not-Quite-Eddie spat, “can’t even fight back,

sissy? Too pansy to hit the Spaghetti Man?” he taunted even as his gaze remained entirely trained on Richie. His grin was wretched and hateful, revealing crooked and rotting teeth behind cracked, bloody lips. His eyes, shadowed by the sun now rapidly setting which threw them further into darkness, shined with an evil glint that filled Richie’s heart with something vile and indescribable.

Richie would not lay a finger on Eddie, would never ever ever ever hurt him even as he felt his eyes begin to pop out of his skull as Almost-Eddie fist clenched tighter and tighter around his throat. Suddenly Barely-Eddie’s smile dropped, and he began to gag. His hands loosened their vice-grip on Richie and he sputtered and gasped for air. Not-Eddie withdrew his hands, fear and pain etched on his face like an ancient and terrible curse written on a tombstone, and Richie could see them clearly. From his fingertips to his wrists, black, pulsing veins spread on Eddie’s hands. Eddie gagged one last time, and a black-brown ooze dripped from his mouth. He glanced up at Richie (It was so dark now Richie could barely make out his face but he *knew* he was looking at him) and began to wail.

His sobs echoed in this endless space, bouncing off invisible walls as more of that disgusting liquid sputtered and poured from his lips. “I’m sick!” He cried, “I’m sick!” and then he curled into himself, screaming wails of torment. “I’m sick, Richie! How?” He screeched, rocking back and forth, “All I ever did was touch you and you loved me and now I’m sick!”. Richie felt his eyes on him again as he continued to cry out “Sick!” again “Sick!” and again “Sick! Sick! Sick! Sick! Disgusting! Sick! Sick! Sick! Si-”

“-ichie!” a shout was heard.

Richie shot up screaming, tense and terrified. It was still dark, but Not-Almost-Barely Eddie was gone. He quickly got bearings of his

surroundings; the pillows, the blankets, and his friends all huddled around him like a cult circle. He noticed that Stan had his arm in a vice grip, concern etched into his stare. Bev was slowly, gingerly, wrapping her arms around Richie's shoulders as Ben and Bill looked on from beside her. Mike was seated at Richie's feet, holding them in place. Had he been kicking?

Richie, as he tried desperately to ground himself mentally, was still physically thrashing and gasping raggedly, hoarse sobs coming with each laboured, erratic breath.

"Richie!" Stan cried again, shaking Richie's arm in an attempt to bring him back from his nightmare. Richie stopped, sat stiff and stared wide-eyed at him.

"Eddie..." was all he could utter, hiccuping and sniffing like a toddler. He had made Eddie ill, infected him. Richie felt like he would throw up, but that acidic burn of bile at the back of his throat never moved any further up.

"What about Eddie?" Bill asked, cowering behind Beverly as if he was fearful of Richie. The realization that he was scaring his friends dragged Richie out of his delusions and back to Earth.

"He..." he started to explain, but a strange awareness of the room washed over him, and he whipped his head around wildly, searching, "Where is he?"

"I'm right here, Richie," a soft voice whispered into the nape of his neck, and a warm body pressed into his back, which made Richie

flinch away. Skinny arms wrapped around his torso. "It's okay, I'm right here" Eddie muttered soothingly. The gesture brought up indescribable feelings from deep within Richie's heart, and all at once the tears came back in droves. He squeezed his eyes shut as he cried, trying to focus on the feeling of Eddie's warmth. Eddie rocked them very slightly from side to side, shushing in Richie's ear and whispering reassurances. Richie would have been mortified at being treated like a child if he was in his right mind. The unwavering calm and fondness in Eddie's voice was a stark contrast to the vomiting, screaming mess of his dream.

"Sick!"

Richie pulled away. Ripping himself from Eddie's firm grasp felt like splitting himself in two, but he couldn't be around him then. He needed to think without the subject of his dreams and nightmares holding him and reminding him of everything *It* had held over him and taunted him with. Richie looked back at Eddie and was devastated by his bed-head and big, sad staring at him in *that* way.

"Richie..." Eddie uttered. It sounded like he was going to say something to try and get Richie to return to his arms, but he just turned his head away, revealing the still visible indent of a pillow crease on his cheek.

Richie stood up and stumbled his way through the dark to his bag. He tripped over a couple of pillows, but he found it and began to dig through it. Everybody was silent, just as they had been earlier after Eddie had thrown up.

"Sick!"

Richie got a hold of his quarter-pack of Camels (he didn't have a preference like Beverly did, who mainly smoked Emperors) and his lighter and began to leave.

Bev was the one who spoke up first. "Where are you going?" she asked, despite knowing damn well where he was going.

"I need a smoke" was all of the explanation he gave in reply before leaving to go outside. The floorboards creaked as he stepped and Richie realized that Bill's parents must of been home by then. At the same time, if he's screaming and kicking hadn't been enough to wake them, a couple of squeaky floorboards wouldn't do him too much harm.

He swung the front door open, letting the frosty-cool breeze hit him all at once. He swiftly closed the door behind him and slid down onto the porch step. The crisp night air clung to him and froze him to the bone, but it was refreshing; exhilarating in a way. He stuck a cigarette between his teeth and began to flick at his lighter. Sparks flew briefly, and then a tiny flame. Richie's hands shook, he didn't stop to think about the reason, and carefully pressed the fire to the end of his cigarette. The smell of burning tobacco and paper immediately hit his nose and he felt his shoulders lower and his brows disconnect themselves.

In just his t-shirt and pajama bottoms, Richie should have been much colder than he was. He felt the frosty air bite at him, a sharp and tingling pain that spread over his exposed skin, but he didn't feel *cold*. He pulled the cigarette out from his mouth, followed it with an exhale of ashy smoke that spread and faded into the night. He stared out into the quiet suburbia. The lights in all of the houses dark were

except for a few porch lights (including Bill's own shining above him) attracting eager moths. The sound of crickets was absent, which wasn't surprising considering the weather, but it was also a relief. Anything that reminded him of that dream was setting him off in a not-so-nice way.

He heard the door open and close behind him, and he tried not to react but he couldn't help the little jolt that ripped through his muscles at the sound. He didn't look at them, but he could sense one of his friends standing behind him, staring at him. They were probably waiting for him to say something. He took a very, very long drag of his cigarette. He didn't want to talk about it. He hoped whoever it was behind him would understand and just go back inside.

"Mind if I steal a cig?" Bev's voice inquired softly. Richie didn't say anything, just nodded and quietly fumbled for his pack. He felt the step dip just the slightest bit more as Bev sat next to him. He waved a cigarette in her general direction, trying to look at her as little as possible. She gently and very slowly took it from him, as if he was a deer that would run if she made any too sudden movements. And he would have, given the opportunity. He so desperately wanted himself to be alone, even if this was Bev. He tossed her his lighter and he heard the rough telltale clicking of a sticky lighter trying to produce a spark. Eventually, Bev got it and lit her cigarette. She put the lighter down between them and sighed, letting out smoke along with it.

"Why're you out here?" Richie muttered, less a genuine question and more an attempt to find a way to get her away from him.

"Why are you?" she responded. Her voice was soft but her tone was not intentionally sweet or worrying. She didn't speak like he expected

her to; like his mom when he would be crying and she would say “*I don’t understand*” because she genuinely didn't understand. Wasn't her son too old to be crying over some senseless name-calling? She didn't know how to comfort her own son. Beverly spoke to him, quiet as she was, as if he was an equal. Which he guessed he was, they both had to face their fears together in those sewers but...

“I told you I needed a smoke”

...she would never understand the true extent of his fears.

Bev clicked her tongue and persisted. “Okay, why else?”.

“Because I...” he clenched his jaw. He couldn't lie to Bev, but God knows what she would think of him if she knew the truth. He got lucky with Stan, got lucky to have one friend who was there for him. Stan told him to tell the others, told him that they would understand, but he didn't get it. Letting this out in the open would only cause him problems. He was doing just fine burying these feelings deep, deep down and praying for the right girl to come by to sweep him off his feet. He had accepted that he didn't exactly like girls, but there was still that tiny piece of hope in the Pandora's box that was his subconscious that *one* would make him feel something.

In the silence as Richie stewed in his thoughts, Bev shivered. “It's cold out here, Richie” she whispered.

“I know, I can deal with it” he responded, and he believed it even as his face and hands were numb and his cigarette went ignored between his forefinger and thumb.

“You don’t have to. You can come inside”

“I’ve lived in Derry my whole life. I can handle the cold”

“So have I, and even I know when facing the things you fear the most is better than being left outside” Bev put a hand on his shoulder but he barely felt it. He had no energy to even shake like she was, it was like he was turning into pure ice.

“Richie...”

He knew that this wasn’t about the temperature anymore. He tried to lighten up a bit, a last-ditch attempt to get them to *stop* talking about this.

“The only thing I’m afraid of is catching Mrs. Kaspbrak’s crabs”

“And Eddie” she didn’t hesitate, and it was like they were playing a long game of chess and Beverly had just taken his king. “I heard what you said to him, only when you were sure he was asleep”.

Richie was silenced. He looked at Bev for the first time since he had woken up. She was wearing a fleece sweater and her cheeks and ears were a deep red. She looked just as frozen as he felt.

“I’m so cold, Bev. It’s so cold” he acquiesced.

She in an instant tossed her cigarette aside, reached out for him and pulled him into a tight hug that managed to bring back some feeling into his limbs. He sobbed. Was it going to be like this every time he showed an emotion? He laughed internally at how ridiculous he felt.

After a while he pulled away and huffed out a laugh, “Okay, let’s go inside” he sniffed “I can already feel the snot freezing on my face”. They both stumbled up. Richie’s legs had fallen asleep at some point, so it felt like pins and needles walking into that house but the warmth and light were so inviting that he was able to shake it off.

As soon as they both entered the living room again the rest of the Losers were sitting, awake, clumped together and speaking in hushed voices. They all noticed Bev and Richie at once. He didn’t know what to say.

Luckily, Bev did. “Okay, you all can stop staring. I think we’ve all had emotional outbursts due to our intense trauma” she joked.

Richie barked a laugh while the rest smiled easily. Richie’s eyes instinctively drifted to Eddie, who was staring up at him.

‘Are you okay?’ Eddie mouthed, still smiling but worry knitted his eyebrows together tightly.

Richie nodded, and while he felt like the world was about to implode

around him, seeing Eddie grin brightly back at him made cold and numbness worth it.